

Co-creating a Brass Band Dance Number for a Large-scale Community Opera Project with the Aid of Improvisatory Techniques

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‘Community music’ is an area of both practical and theoretical activity that emerged in the wake of the cultural revolution that transformed Western society in the 1960s.¹ Its important concepts include ‘cultural democracy’ and ‘participatory art’, which capture the aspiration to include communities in the creative process of composing new music, not just its performance.² Lee Higgins, for example, argues that ‘those working as community artists shared a dislike of cultural hierarchies and believed in co-authorship of work and in the creative potential of all sections of the community.’³ Additionally, François Matarasso has observed that participatory art is a ‘specific and historically-recent practice that connects professional and non-professional artists in an act of co-creation.’⁴ While there are many labels to describe this approach, such as ‘group creativity’ or ‘collaborative creativity’, I refer to it as a ‘co-creative’ approach. In the 1980s, this co-creative approach began to influence the work of opera houses and composers writing ‘community operas’, many of whom followed the example set by Benjamin Britten with works such as *Noye’s Fludde* (1958). Prominent amongst these composers was

¹ Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Lee Higgins, ‘Introduction: An Overview of Community Music in the Twenty-first Century,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*, ed. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Lee Higgins (New York: OUP, 2018), 3–6.

² See James Bau Graves, *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community and Public Purpose* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

³ Lee Higgins, *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* (New York: OUP, 2012), 32.

⁴ François Matarasso, *A Restless Art: How Participation Won, and Why it Matters* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), 19.

Jonathan Dove, who was commissioned by the Glyndebourne Opera House to compose three community operas involving co-creative activities: *Hasting Springs* (1990), *Dreamdragons* (1993), and *In Search of Angels* (1995).⁵ Dove recollects that:

I developed a more playful way of working, finding different ways of getting groups improvising together in song (while stamping and clapping and even dancing), splitting into groups to try out several different ways of singing just one or two lines of a libretto, then all gathering around the piano to stitch the fragments together: this process often led to surprisingly organic melodies. Obviously, from the piano, I had a hand in shaping the music, but there was always a sense of collective achievement, and shared ownership.⁶

It is clear from this account that improvisation played an important role in Dove's co-creative process, as had also been the case in community music projects generally from the 1960s onwards.⁷ Inspired by this approach, composers involved with community opera projects have documented ways of generating musical material using group improvisation; Omar Shahryar, for example, derived melodies from the vocal contours of an improvised group melody sung in unison to a pre-existing text. Shahryar describes the technique as follows:

Looking at a line of text, ask everyone in the room to improvise the same melody for that line all at the same time. This will sound chaotic, but when you get them to do this 3 or 4 times, a discernible melody should appear as people instinctively copy each other. The Receiver listens for any discernible melody lines appearing from the cacophony, and this becomes the melody.⁸

Similarly, John Barber incorporated a melody written co-creatively during a workshop with a group of school children into his community opera *We Are Shadows* (2011). Barber recalls that 'the class who came up with this text and tune really enjoyed the fact their material reappeared so often.'⁹

The above examples show how materials devised using improvisatory techniques in a workshop setting can be integrated into a community opera and how this process can be rewarding for both composers and participants. Over the last thirty years, this approach has been used by many composers and has been employed as part of 'outreach' projects run by opera houses in the United Kingdom.¹⁰ However, there are no published accounts of which I am aware that consider how improvisational techniques can be used to develop musical material involving participants not just through singing and acting, but through the use of onstage musicians such as bands.

⁵ Jonathan Dove, 'From the Weaving-shed to the Airport: Experiences of Writing Opera for Glyndebourne and the Community,' *Glyndebourne Season Programme* (1999), 121–25.

⁶ Jonathan Dove, 'Who Needs Community Opera? Part One: "Let's Take Over a Whole Town!"' *Traction Project* (2020), www.traction-project.eu/who-needs-community-opera-part-one-lets-take-over-a-whole-town.

⁷ Higgins (*Community Music*, 43) also states that 'The compositional approach involving improvisation was reflected in many early community music projects.'

⁸ Omar Shahryar, 'The Composition of Opera for Young People' (PhD thesis, University of York, 2020), 74–75.

⁹ John Barber, 'Finding a Place in Society; Finding a Voice,' in *Beyond Britten: The Composer and the Community*, ed. Ghislaine Kenyon and Peter Wiegold (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), 107–22.

¹⁰ For a more recent case study, see Oliver Rudland, 'How a Community Told Its Story through Opera—Exploring the Techniques and Methods in a Co-created Production,' *Sounding Board: The Journal of Community Music* (2021): 7–10.

The operatic repertoire is replete with examples of integrated stage bands of varying types, such as the background music that accompanies the Act I ball of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, or the onstage military band that appears throughout Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. In many examples, stage bands also provide dance music, from dance interludes in Lully's *tragédie lyrique* operas to the offstage dance music in Britten's *Peter Grimes*.¹¹ Various community operas have followed this tradition by integrating onstage band elements suited to their plots. For example, Dove's *In Search of Angels*, set during the English Civil War, includes the entrance of a samba band procession to represent the arrival of Oliver Cromwell's army.¹² Although there is no written record of how the Peterborough Community Samba Band created the music for the first performance of Dove's opera, it is likely that much of it was generated through improvisatory methods routinely practiced by the band. There is certainly no carefully documented account of how improvisatory techniques employed during a workshop with a band can be integrated into the score of a community opera. In what follows, I aim to fill this research gap by documenting a practice-led research project with the Waterbeach Brass Band (WBBB), a community band based in Cambridgeshire, UK. Derived from an ethnographic diary written during the project, the following account records in detail the co-creation of a swing dance number for inclusion in a community opera, from the activities that took place in several workshops to a subsequent public performance.

Co-creative Improvisatory Workshops: A Practice-led Research Project

The community opera is based on Barry Hines's *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968), a novella set in a Yorkshire coalmining town during the 1950s—a significant setting given that the British brass band evolved in the context of such industrial communities.¹³ In Scene 7 of the opera, set in a pub, a brass band plays swing music to accompany a dance, reflecting the societal function of contemporary dance music during the 1950s.¹⁴ Inspired by this scene, and to provide the basis for an improvisational workshop, I began by composing backing music in a 1950s swing style, akin to the big band arrangements of Benny Goodman or Glenn Miller, only scored for brass band.¹⁵ The music for this arrangement was itself developed from materials created in previous co-creative workshops with school children from a different section of the community opera.¹⁶ This was written to encourage conversational exchange in the improvised group activity known as 'trading fours' or 'trading eights',¹⁷

¹¹ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 104.

¹² Kathryn Deane, 'In Search of Peterborough,' *Sounding Board: The Journal of Community Music* (1995): 12–15.

¹³ Trevor Herbert, *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History* (London: OUP, 2010), 4–17.

¹⁴ An example is the Bryntaf 'Usherettes Jazz Band,' which was made up of miner's wives who performed at dances and functions in workingmen's clubs in the Aberfan and Troedyrhiw valleys. See David Hall, *Working Lives* (London: Corgi Books, 2012), 74.

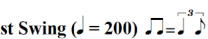
¹⁵ It is, of course, common practice for group improvisations to be based on a simple song or 'standard'. See R. Keith Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 31.

¹⁶ Oliver Rudland, 'Co-creating a Community Opera Chorus with a Year-9 Music Class from an Ethnically Diverse and Economically Deprived Area in West Yorkshire,' *WROCAH Journal*, 7 (2022): 89–106.

¹⁷ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 369–70.

and to provide space for improvisation.¹⁸ This music was played by the WBBB during a preliminary rehearsal. The following example is an excerpt, presented in short score, with a recording of the corresponding passage from the rehearsal.¹⁹

Example 1. Excerpt of backing music rehearsed by the WBBB in preparation for improvisational workshops


Fast Swing (♩ = 200) 

Horns and Baritones

Cornets

Euphonium and Basses

Drum Kit



Recording 1: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-1>

The WBBB consists of non-professional musicians aged from about 18 to 70. The group is not one generally accustomed to improvisation; however, most members have good musical training in reading notation and basic music theory, and some knowledge of the stylistic traits of improvisatory music, likely absorbed through playing brass band arrangements of swing era classics.²⁰ Rather than leaping straight into improvisation with the backing music, therefore, I began the co-creative workshop with some exercises that used techniques familiar to community musicians. To make the musicians feel relaxed and comfortable playing without notated music, individual players were first invited to gradually contribute notes to a tutti cluster chord, in order from the lowest instruments to the highest:

Recording 2: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-2>

This exercise was repeated several times to explore different combinations and harmonies. The musicians were then asked to elaborate on their chosen notes and improvise freely as a group:

Recording 3: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-3>

¹⁸ This is similar, for example, to the ways in which Goodman had arranged songs by Louis Prima, which were then elaborated upon by Goodman's big band 'in the band room', perhaps the equivalent of an improvisatory co-creative workshop. See Sheila Tracy, *Talking Swing: The British Big Band* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1997), 135.

¹⁹ All the evidence in the form of recordings and transcriptions provided here has been through the University of Leeds's ethical review process (FAHC 20-024) and has the full permissions of the participants for inclusion in a published context.

²⁰ Arrangements of compositions by Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller are familiar to the band (such as those by Elgar Howarth) where the solos are notated, and so improvisation is not required for their performance.

Following these free exercises, the band was given four scale sheets to assist in improvising with the backing music. These were transposed to fit the different instruments, as shown in Example 2.

Example 2. Solo Cornet/Fugal Horn in B-flat improvising scale sheets



The four scales provided included the blues scale, notes from which would generally sit comfortably on top of all the backing music. Additionally, the band received the natural minor and tonal minor scales (both from the melodic minor scale in C minor), notes from which could be added to increase the sophistication to the improvisations. The fourth scale—a ‘blues shadow scale’—is a major scale consisting of all the notes *not* in the blues scale, and starting a minor third lower, and is thus generally dissonant with the backing music. The blues shadow scale was added to encourage the players to be inventive and not to fixate on any one set of pitches. These four scales were then used as the basis for another collective improvisation, this time with the drummer playing in the background to maintain the rhythmic momentum, and the conductor indicating to different sections of the band (trombones, horns, cornets, etc.) to take the lead with the improvisations at different moments:

Recording 4: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-4>

In the final stage of this co-creative workshop, the band added their improvisations on top of the backing music that they had previously rehearsed. To assist with this process, the conductor encouraged individual musicians to ‘play out’ at different moments, and the process was repeated several times. Unexpectedly, the first attempt was by far the most fruitful; although the musicians did not improvise through all passages, they played with a spontaneity and flow that was lacking in later attempts.

Recording 5: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-5>

Following the workshop, I transcribed the solos from the recording and integrated them into the score alongside the background music. The transcribed solos are shown below in the order in which they were played:

Example 3. Soprano Cornet in E-flat solo



Example 4. First Trombone in B-flat solo

b. 122

Example 5. Euphonium in B-flat solo

b. 138

Example 6. Second Trombone in B-flat solo

b. 162

Example 7. Flugal Horn in B-flat solo

b. 170

Following the workshop, it was necessary to interpret the transcriptions of the solos, and in doing so I noticed that I had contributed further to the co-creative process. Firstly, I enhanced the unity of the solos by increasing the amount of noticeable similarities between them, and by clarifying various moments when the notes on the recording were indeterminate. For example, the last three bars of both the second trombone and flugal horn parts (Examples 6 and 7) feature a descending chromatic scale in pairs of quavers followed by a syncopated figuration. The flugal player had initially imitated the second trombone during the group improvisation, and after I observed this imitation in the recording I made the syncopated figuration in both solos more similar.

Secondly, that not all band members were equally confident in improvising during the workshop inevitably resulted in differences between the different instruments' improvisations

(for example, the lead solo cornet player, as can be heard in the space between the first trombone and euphonium improvisations in Recording Excerpt 5). I consequently invited the less confident players to take the scale sheets away from the workshop and work on their improvisations individually. In response, the solo cornet player produced the following:

Example 8. Solo Cornet in B-flat revised solo



In this passage, the solo cornet player anticipated a gesture in the background music (written above in small noteheads) by playing it a tone higher in advance of each background statement, thereby extending and enhancing a descending sequential passage. This was a welcome addition, as it provided some simpler material to contrast with the other improvisations while also reflecting the first four bars of the second trombone improvisation (Example 6), which also followed the phrasing of the sequential background passage. Both parts exemplify heterophonic elaboration as a form of development in collective improvisation and demonstrate the value of including the musical contributions of band members who are less confident or experienced improvisors. The passage can be heard as follows during a subsequent public performance of the dance number:

Recording 6: <https://soundcloud.com/oliverrudlandresearch/brassbandexcerpt-6>

Finally, following the workshop, transcriptions of the improvisations were given to the individual players during rehearsals leading up to the public performance. Some players continued to elaborate and adjust their solos until the performance, keeping them free and spontaneous each time, as seen in the following video:

Recording 7 (Video): <https://vimeo.com/690611559>

Integrated Co-creativity: Incorporating the Improvisations into a Dramatic Context

Following the performance, the score of the dance number was updated to include some of these additional variations. Then began the process of integrating the dance number into the community opera. The scene in the pub (mentioned above) begins with this swing dance number, and in a staged performance, an onstage band would perform the number while characters from the opera dance to the music as part of the plot. At a certain point, several characters (Shelia, Debbie, Mrs Casper, and Reg) retire from the dance floor to sit down, and the focus of the drama shifts to their conversation. Reg offers to buy the other characters a drink and then visits the bar, leaving the others to chat. When he returns, he makes the following statement while passing around the drinks: 'Here we are ladies, / bit of a ding-dong starting over there / Been another fall down't' pit. / Best beware!' Example 9 shows how this statement is set to music provided by the soprano cornet improvisation (shown in Example 3 above).

To set this text to music, a few minor rhythmic adjustments were made; for example, an anticipation was added on the word 'bit' in the second and third bars (bb. 351–52). Additionally,

Example 9. Reg's lines set to a melody based on the WBBB soprano cornet improvisation

Reg

f *mf*

350 Here we are la - dies, bit of a ding-dong star-ting o-ver there,

mf *p* *mf* *p*

mp soto voce *mf* *f*

354 been a - no ther fall down't pit. Best be - ware!

mp *mf*

some of the text was extended melodically to accommodate the whole of the improvisation, which had the secondary (and appropriately dramatic) effect of enhancing the urgency of the words 'best beware' by extending their length. The first system (presented in the key of D, a tone higher than the original improvisation) follows the backing music that accompanied the improvisations, although some descending chromatic scales in the second stave down were superimposed to evoke the laughter and chit-chat of the other characters present. In the second system, however, the backing music introduces fresh material, which modulates the improvisation up a major third, and adds to the dramatic urgency of the text at this moment by distorting the improvisation so that Reg's baritone voice reaches a climatic F-sharp—the top of its tessitura—on the word 'beware.' From a dramatic perspective, these alterations produce a musical tapestry: a conversation is taking place, but behind this conversation the swing band performs dance music as part of the dramatic scene. The swing band dance music, distorted by the content of what is taking place in the drama, therefore serves as a conduit through which the emotional content of the conversation can be conveyed.

These dramatic features continue throughout the rest of the scene during other conversations. One example concerns an agitated dispute between a group of miners who are discussing the accident down the coalmine, to which Reg had previously referred. Here, the soprano cornet improvisation is distorted further; on the words 'what then?', the melody culminates in a 'questioning' French sixth sonority (F-sharp, A-flat, C, D), showing how the improvisation was extended and tonally altered to match the harmony (see the upper voice in the upper ossia part of Example 10).

Conclusions: Responses, Risks, Rewards

The process documented in this article, from running a co-creative workshop to organising the subsequent rehearsals and performance, could be seen as a controlled replication of the historical circumstances of the 'band room', and the culture of live improvised performance in which swing band dance music developed. To some extent, this process could be said to reflect the origins of jazz itself, which, as Wynton Marsalis writes, was created largely through the fusion of late nineteenth-century wind band music and techniques of 'collective improvisation'.²¹ By employing these methods, this process gave the swing dance number an 'authentic' sound, in that it mirrors both the historical period of the opera and the sociological circumstances of its setting, since brass bands were adopted in mining communities as instrumental alternatives to big bands because such instruments were available to them. It might be possible to compose music in this style without such a co-creative process; however, this would likely not produce the vitality and variety of responses generated by working with a real musical community, especially considering that the brass band style itself evolved in this particular context. Additionally, the co-creative process has both a musical and social outcome, since including the band in the creative process makes it more appealing and interesting to them, a phenomenon regularly noted by community music theorists.²²

The risks of working with a brass band in this manner are that such ensembles are rarely accustomed to improvisation and prefer to read from notated parts, while collaboration in general is not necessarily easy, and is often fraught with disagreements, tensions, and contradictions.²³ Therefore, as shown in this case study, a careful, flexible, and patient process is required to tease out different responses from individual members, especially from those less confident or experienced in improvisation. However, the rewards of this process can, in some ways, enhance the overall quality of the combined efforts: by juxtaposing more flamboyant responses with simpler, more direct ones, it is possible to enhance the music's stylistic authenticity and transform a performance limitation into an aesthetic and dramatic advantage.²⁴

²¹ Wynton Marsalis, *Marsalis on Music* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 93–118. Some would consider Marsalis to be a controversial or biased figure, but a shift in focus away from the sonic nature of Jazz towards the social context in which Jazz evolved (of especial concern to Marsalis in relation to his 'trad jazz' revival) is something that has also been of interest to 'New Jazz Studies' scholars. See, for example, R. O'Meally, B. Edwards & F. Griffin, eds, *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²² Higgins, *Community Music*, 174–84.

²³ Margaret S. Barrett, ed., *Collaborative Creative Thought and Practice in Music* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 8.

²⁴ Barrett notes that it is necessary to 'work productively with these features to advance rather than hinder creative thought and activity.' See 'Introduction,' in *Collaborative Creative Thought and Practice in Music*, 8.

Example 10. The soprano cornet improvisation integrated into an ensemble passage from Scene 7 of the community opera

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Walter

Walter

Not this time, not this time, but what a - bout next time?!

Frank

Frank

Not this time, not this time, but what a - bout next time?!

Ronnie

Ronnie

Not this time, not this time, but what a - bout next time?!

Steve

Steve

Not this time, not this time, but what a - bout next time?!

Jud

Jud

not this time, not

Bob

Bob

hurt, no - one got killed____

f *mf* *f* *ff*

The musical score is written for a community opera. It features six vocal parts and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are for Walter, Frank, Ronnie, Steve, Jud, and Bob. The piano accompaniment is written for a grand piano. The score includes lyrics and dynamic markings. The key signature is one flat (Bb). The time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 364 and 37 indicated. The lyrics are: "Not this time, not this time, but what a - bout next time?!" for Walter, Frank, Ronnie, and Steve; "not this time, not" for Jud; and "hurt, no - one got killed____" for Bob. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings of *f*, *mf*, and *ff*.

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Walter

What a - bout next time, but what a - bout next time?! What a - bout then?! What then, what then, what

Frank

What a - bout next time, but what a - bout next time?! What a - bout then?! What then, what then, what

Ronnie

What a - bout next time, but what a - bout next time?! What a - bout next time?! What then, what then, what

Steve

What a - bout next time, but what a - bout next time?! What a - bout next time?! What then, what then, what

Jud

ff

this time, but next time, but next time, what then, what

Bob

f

By integrating such responses into a scene for a large-scale community opera, the rewards go even further; through these musical materials, the dramatic content of the story can be enhanced and conveyed with greater alacrity and sophistication. Transferring this stylistic authenticity into a dramatic realisation of the circumstances in which it was created also infuses the scene with a musical-dramatic realism. The unlikely combination of operatic dialogue and collective improvisation can perhaps be achieved so successfully because they both involve conversational exchanges, a similarity that has been often noted by scholars of improvisation and group creativity.²⁵ Finally, this project has revealed the potential for conducting future research into onstage or offstage band elements in different settings and sociological circumstances. Given the array of historical contexts in which improvised music has played a social role, the possibilities for further research of this nature would seem considerable.

About the Author

Oliver Rudland is a composer and community musician undertaking a PhD at Leeds University. His research, which focuses on the use of co-creative techniques in the composition of large-scale community opera projects, has been published by *Sounding Board: The Journal of Community Music*, *WRoCAH Journal*, and *TEMPO*. Oliver also teaches composition and stylistics at the University of Cambridge.

²⁵ Sawyer, for example, observes that 'Jazz is like conversation, conversation is improvised dialogue, and improv is like Jazz.' Sawyer, *Group Creativity*, 29.